



 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

Tackling alcohol misuse is everyone's responsibility

December 26, 2010 - 3:00AM

Christmas is a time for celebration, yet sadly scenes of anti-social behaviour are all too common in our pubs and clubs, on our streets and beaches, and in other social settings. "Anti-alcohol" lobby groups apparently revel in using the silly season as a platform to wag their finger at the companies which produce these alcoholic brands.

Advertisement

The alcohol industry argues that to combat under-age and irresponsible drinking among young people, individuals need to take responsibility for their actions.

But for many Australians, the conversation has progressed from simply putting the onus of alcohol misuse solely on the drinker, with recognition that tackling such a problem is a shared responsibility. We know that alcohol misuse costs the Australian economy \$36 billion each year. The high human and financial cost is such a concern it has been identified as a priority issue by the World Health Organisation.

The reality is, a person's irresponsible drinking - whether they are under-age or over 18 - can have devastating effects on those around them, from their family and friends, to their co-workers and even strangers.

Just last weekend the trans-Tasman police initiative Operation Unite resulted in more than 2617 arrests. There were 222 assaults, 1072 drink-driving offences and 1073 licensing breaches across Australia and New Zealand.

To effectively combat alcohol misuse requires leadership from all levels of government, health agencies, the alcohol industry, the drinkers themselves, their families, friends and local communities.

The chairman of the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia and Diageo Australia managing director, Tim Salt, argues that limiting the availability of alcohol is a "simple-sounding solution". A broad range of research has found if you limit the supply of alcohol, consumption will fall and in turn have a flow-on effect in reducing alcohol-related harm. In Newcastle, a 2008 pilot study imposed 1am lock-outs combined with a 3am/3.30am closing time for pubs and clubs. This resulted in a 37 per cent reduction in late-night alcohol-related assaults in the following

18 months. The results speak for themselves, and yet in Melbourne for the past 20 years a new liquor licence continues to be approved every 24 hours.

Young people are certainly among the most vulnerable when it comes to alcohol-related harm. It has been estimated that one Australian teenager dies and more than 60 are admitted to hospital each week from alcohol-related causes.

Government guidelines tell us that earlier initiation of drinking is linked to increased alcohol consumption in later adolescence and young adulthood. A study of the Bundaberg Rum brand by Curtin University, published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, revealed that more than 75 per cent of children and adolescents aged nine to 15 years are able to recognise Bundy R. Bear and correctly associate the fluffy white mascot with an alcoholic product. This increases to 84 per cent of 13- to 15-year-olds identifying and associating Bundy R. Bear with an alcoholic product.

A new product was launched this year, the pre-mixed, two-litre cask of Smirnoff vodka and cranberry, and vodka and blood orange, with a recommended price of \$26.99 a box. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, pre-mixed drinks are the alcoholic beverage of choice for 12- to 17-year-olds. These two-litre casks contain 10 standard drinks. If a consumer were to buy the product at the recommended retail price, this would equate to a cost of just \$2.70 per standard drink. The industry claims that the

casks are marketed as a premium drink for people aged 30 and over. But at a cost of \$2.70 a drink, these sweet, attractively packaged products could clearly appeal to a younger market with less disposable income.

Alcohol sponsorship has long been associated with big sporting and music events. In the case of the music festival Big Day Out, which is marketed to people aged 16 and older, the 3 million-strong audience were this year exposed to a plethora of promotional material and marketing activity by brands including Jim Beam, Jagermeister, Tooheys, Smirnoff and Strongbow. When Australians turn on their televisions they confront more of the same, with alcohol advertising part of our staple diet during live sports broadcasts. Given these factors, we'd do well to ask whether self-regulation of alcohol advertising and promotion really works in the best interest of consumers and in particular young, impressionable minds.

At the most serious end, AER Foundation research shows a person dies each day because of someone else's drinking. That's about 367 deaths per year in Australia. Add to this the fact that more than 73 per cent of adults have been negatively affected by someone else's drinking in the past year, and you have strong evidence that alcohol misuse affects Australians in every demographic.

Among the most vulnerable groups in society, alcohol misuse has been found to be a factor in almost 20,000 substantiated cases of child abuse and in more than 24,000 cases of domestic violence every year.

The alcohol industry states that it is addressing alcohol misuse through public awareness campaigns, such as the work done by DrinkWise. This is certainly a step in the right direction, but evidence tells us that public awareness campaigns alone will not solve this issue.

Christmas is a great time to celebrate with family and friends. It's also a time for us to look out for our mates and our loved ones by drinking responsibly.

The Reverend Tim Costello is a director of the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/tackling-alcohol-misuse-is-everyones-responsibility-20101225-197f7.html>